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## Scales as a Symbol of Metaphysical Judgement – from *Misterium Tremendum* to *Misterium Fascinosum* An Analysis of Selected Works of Netherlandish Masters of Painting

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to analyze the motif of scales in Netherlandish art from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The motif of scales was present in art from earliest times, but its role and function differed in various historical epochs – antique, the middle ages, and the modern age. The core part of the article is devoted to the symbolic relationship between scales and different aspects of justice. The first painting taken into consideration is Rogier van der Weyden's *Last Judgment* (approx. 1445 to 1450), and the last one – Jan Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (approx. 1662-1663). The article attempts to answer some crucial questions. What were the meanings attributed to scales during the two centuries examined? How did these meanings evolve, and was the interpretation of the symbol influenced by the ethos characteristic for particular periods and geographical spaces, as well as transient fashions, religious

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and political changes? The article presents paintings selected during the query into Netherlandish art, along with a discussion on their content and information about their creators. It analyzes the symbol of scales in the context of images created by the masters of Netherlandish painting and offers a synthesis of the observed changes in the perception of scales as a symbol during the period discussed.

**Keywords:** symbol of scales, justice, Last Judgment, Netherlandish painting

## Introduction

Symbols can be defined as artists' depictions connected, by means of specific interrelations, with other notions, ideas or spiritual feelings, most often being a part of an upper-level reality.<sup>1</sup> They are mainly centred around a given cultural circle, with only a few functioning as universal symbols. Some items bring about certain associations.

Referring back to the original meaning of Greek *symbolon*, it can be observed that this word has been always filled with duality, the rule to divide and join, part and meet, forget and re-recognize. [...] A characteristic of a symbol is its indefinite nature, vagueness; it is often fluid, shifting, full of contradictions, not infrequently available only to the initiated.<sup>2</sup>

The usage of symbols can combine reality with abstraction, depictions of things with ideas. According to Jean Hani, real (factual) symbolism is defined by

an inextricable connection between a physical object and its spiritual meaning; it is a hierarchical and substantial bond, analogous to one between a soul and a body or the visible and unseen reality; this bond is perceived by the mind as an organic whole, a true hypostasis available for a person to understand as a notion by means of an immediate mental synthesis supported by a flash of intuition.<sup>3</sup>

The symbol of scales is exceptionally interesting from the perspective of legal iconography. A comparison of the social, religious, and political history of the Netherlands with the changes happening in the field of arts leads to interesting

<sup>1</sup> *Symbol* [entry in:], D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, trans. W. Zakrzewska, P. Pachciarek, R. Turzyński, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1990, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Symbol* [entry in:], W. Kopalinski, *Słownik symboli*, Wydawnictwo Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1990, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> J. Hani, *Symbolika świątyni chrześcijańskiej*, trans. A.Q. Lavique, Znak, Kraków 1998, p. 15.

conclusions. The change in the ways balances are used as symbols corresponds to changes occurring in the legal culture. The motif of scales has existed in arts since time immemorial, differing in both the messages it conveys and its functions – it was different in the ancient or Christian world and in modern times. The aim of this article is to offer an overview of the transition from the ideas of justice present in the medieval mentality and spirituality to those perceptible in the height of the baroque – from the Last Judgement justice to the secular ideas of fair reward, living according to conscience, and secular law. The works selected for this purpose – by Roger van Weyden, Hans Memling and Jan Vermeer – follow the general developmental trends in the depiction and help to understand this phenomenon.

The choice of the Netherlands was intentional because it, like no other region, was full of the tensions typical for the era and, moreover, it developed a large number of schools of painting over a relatively small area. It was a place where all the representative cultural transformations of the continent focused. The changes occurring were the outcomes of the Reformation, the birth of modern nations, and struggles for independence from the universal power of emperors.

## The Social, Political and Religious Context of Netherlandish Painting

A distinctive feature of the Netherlandish culture of the 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century was, in comparison with Europe of the time, the presence of a bourgeoisie alongside the court culture. The features of the bourgeois culture, involving realism, particularism, and critical attitudes to established social conditions, left their mark on the development of painting in the region.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century was a period of unification of the political organisms of the Netherlands. The external catalysts for that change were the growing importance of the Duchy of Burgundy and its expansiveness. The sovereigns of the Duchy gradually led to the unification of the Netherlands under their rule. "In less than a century, a big country was created with the territories spreading throughout Burgundy and most of the Netherlands."<sup>4</sup> It was clear that the gentry was being supplanted from the highest rank in the society by the bourgeoisie. The 15<sup>th</sup> century was a period of intensive development of the court and knight culture (following the example of the French, gathered around the court of the Dukes of Burgundy and the Dutch Counts' Court in the Hague). It was also the period when the style of the first Netherlandish masters of painting was formed. They were called the Flemish Primitives. The main features of their art were comprised of a complex perception of man inside architectural and landscape sceneries, the illusion of a real,

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<sup>4</sup> J. Balicki, M. Bogucka, *Historia Holandii*, trans. K. Dobrzeniecki, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Warszawa 1989, p. 58.

multidimensional and deep space filled with light and air, enriched with a unique precision in rendering shapes and texture of items and figures.<sup>5</sup>

The death of Charles the Bold without male issue and the enthronement of his daughter Mary, the fiancée of a Habsburg – Maximilian of Austria – started a new stage in the history of the Netherlands. The early period under the rule of the Habsburg was filled with anxieties and rebellions, domestic fights and conflicts between the estates. Charles's many-years conflict with powerful France in the borderlands heightened the feeling of anxiety in the country. In 1548 the Diet of Augsburg officially recognized the Netherlands as a unitary state constituting a part of the Empire. The Netherlands became at the time a hereditary property of the House of Habsburg. It was a really precious land for the dynasty because of the period of prosperity in the area, its dense population (almost three million inhabitants), and highly urbanized structure (around three hundred cities). At that time Dutch cities controlled half of the European trade.

In the years 1477-1581, under the rule of the Habsburgs, the art of painting developed in the spirit of humanism, supported by numerous schools in the north of the country. It was the time when the distinguishing style of northern Netherlands was formed, the southern part of the country being, to a large extent, under the influence of Italy.

The beginning of this period is a continuation of that of the masters of the 15<sup>th</sup> century; with Gerard David (who died in 1523) being a good example. Apart from the humanistic temperance, revolutionary transformations of the era were also visible. Hieronymus Bosch (who died in 1516) was an exceptionally original Symbolist artist, ahead of his times. The influence of Italian painting can be observed, among others, in the works of Quentin Matsys (around 1465-1530). Also worth mentioning are the exponents of the unique Netherlandish style from the north – Joest van Calcar and Lucas van Leyden. This trend was characterized by a constant need to search for new means of artistic expression. The middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was also the creative period of one of most eminent genre and landscape painters – Peter Bruegel (1525-1569).

In the second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Netherlandish painting was in its heyday, both in its technical aspect and concerning the dynamism of new figurative views. There were two main centres – Antwerp (in the south) and Haarlem (in the north). Amsterdam was famous for Cornelis Ketel (1562-1638), a precursor of Hals and Rembrandt whereas, among many other artists, Haarlem was the place of work for Cornelis Corneliszoon, a representative of Mannerism.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century was a time of growing social conflicts, which were the outcome of feudal antagonisms, early capitalism relations, and above all, religion-relat-

<sup>5</sup> D. Folga-Januszewska, A. Ziemia (ed.), *Transalpinum. Od Giorgione i Dürera do Tycjana i Rubensa. Dzieła malarstwa z Kunsthistorisches Museum Wiedniu, Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie i Muzeum Narodowego w Gdańsku*, BOSZ, Olszanica 2004, p. 32.

ed issues. The Reformation, which appeared early in the region, gained large public support. Growing conflicts between the estates and the ruler were exacerbated when Philip II became King in 1556. This happened as the result of another war with France and increased fiscal stringency. The estate system of the country did not match the absolutist aspirations of the king from the House of Habsburg.

In the second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Netherlands was plunged into a civil war. The division in the country was visible. The Catholic provinces of the south signed the Union of Arras in January 1579, whereas the north declared further fights against the Spanish invader and guaranteed freedom of religion by signing the Union of Utrecht two weeks later. This division became an inherent part of the history of the Netherlands, laying the foundations for two countries – Belgium and Holland. In 1648 the independence of the latter was guaranteed by the Peace of Westphalia which ended the Thirty Years' War. The Catholic provinces of the south remained under the Spanish rule until the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

For northern Netherlands the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a time of peak development. It was not by coincidence that it was called the golden age of national culture. Holland became the centre of European education, science, and publishing. It attracted plenty of religious dissenters, traders, philosophers, and artists from all over Europe. The art of painting was closely related to the development of social life in the north. Art was becoming more and more democratic. Paintings were easily accessible on the market, even for the lower classes. According to the estimate of Ad van der Woude, the years 1580-1599 saw the creation of 680,000 new paintings within the Dutch Republic, whereas between 1660-1679 saw even more than 1,200,000.<sup>6</sup> Apart from prolific painters, there were also those who reserved more time for the process of creation and did so individually, for instance Jan Vermeer. Among all old and new motifs existing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, religious ones were the most common.<sup>7</sup>

The separate course of development of art in the southern Netherlands at the close of the 16<sup>th</sup> and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was one of the outcomes of the Reformation and the religious-political split of the country into two parts. The differences between the dynastic Flemish art and the bourgeois-protestant art of Holland were substantial. This was particularly visible in painting, the art which was of such great significance in the whole of Europe because of the individuality of Rubens. In the first part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century his studio was the main art centre in the country, inspiring numerous Flemish masters of painting.

The art of the southern Netherlands was formed on the basis of the medieval and Renaissance Netherlandish tradition, combined with a strong influence of the

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<sup>6</sup> A. van der Woude, *The Volume and Value of Paintings in Holland at the Time of the Dutch Republic*, in: D. Freedberg, J. de Vries (ed.), *Art in History, History in Art*, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Santa Monica CA 1991, p. 315.

<sup>7</sup> J. Balicki, M. Bogucka, op. cit., p. 213.

Counter-Reformation style from Italy. After the war, there was a visible need to redress the wrongs done in the past by the iconoclasts, which manifested itself in the extraordinary development in the field of painting in the first part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> This art also displayed a significant originality in motifs.

Robert Genaille presented the dissimilarities in the ways of expression and nuances in displaying artistic sensitivity between the north and the south synthetically: "In the northern provinces of the Netherlands artists intensely felt magical effects of the world, so they expressed in their works the poetry of passing moments and secrets of the human soul. In the art of the southern provinces the interest in experienced reality resulted in the magic of colours."<sup>9</sup>

## Scales as a Symbol of Justice. Works of van der Weyden, Memling and Vermeer

The Book of Revelation (Rev 20:11) and the Gospel According to Matthew (Mt 24:31) were the starting points for displaying the Last Judgement in Christian culture. Byzantine and Western Christianity paintings represented different iconographic models of this topic. One of the common motifs for both branches of Christianity was the weighing of souls. From the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Archangel Gabriel was a very significant figure in the depictions of the Last Judgement, wielding scales and a sword in his hands. The archangel was said to be the one responsible for weighing souls and separating the saved from the damned; the former reached the New Jerusalem, while the latter were chained and dragged by devils who struggled to get to hell, which was surrounded by angels fighting for the souls (psychomachia – the battle of spirits).

There were several ways of separating the 'good' people from the sinners. Painters had to deal with two fundamental issues: first, what was weighed; and second, how to interpret the result. In various depictions of the Judgement the things weighed on the scales differed. One can find souls, symbols of good and bad deeds, "good" and "bad" doubles of the departed (*peccata and virtutes*), or even people who rose from the dead. The two-pan balance shows the result in a form of information about the difference between the weights of the two items. The result, interpreted symbolically or according to theological doctrine, was always ambiguous. Another issue complicating the task was the need to give the action of weighing an artistic expression and synchronize it with the composition of the scenes from the Last Judgement. The scales should overbalance in favour of souls full of grace, pulling the others downwards, which may be naturally associated with the movement

<sup>8</sup> P. Arblaster, *A History of the Low Countries*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2006, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> R. Genaille, *Encyklopedia malarstwa flamandzkiego i holenderskiego*, trans. E. Maliszewska, K. Secomska, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, PWN, Warszawa 2001, p. 5.

towards hellfire and the awaiting devils who at times, referring to psychomachia, fought for such souls even by pulling the pan to their side. In the end, the results of psychostasia (the weighing of souls) were sometimes interpreted differently.<sup>10</sup> This dichotomy can be observed in the works of van der Weyden and Memling.



Il. 1. Rogier van der Weyden, *The Last Judgement*, polyptych, 1446-1452, oil on wood, 215 × 560 cm, Musée de l'Hôtel Dieu, Beaune

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org> [accessed: 12.11.2015].

Rogier van der Weyden received a commission for *The Last Judgement* (a polyptych created between 1446 and 1552) from a Burgundian chancellor, Nicolas Rolin. The painting presents a two-level composition built around the figure of Christ and the Archangel Michael. Above, on a golden cloud, are the Apostles, judges of the heavenly tribunal, the pope, a bishop, a king, a monk, and three women. The ground is full of resurrected souls either going to heaven or suffering from being sentenced to eternal damnation. The central panel is dominated by the figure of Christ in Majesty (*Maiestas Domini*), with the Mother of God on one side of the rainbow and Saint John the Baptist on the other. The right hand of Jesus is raised in a gesture of benediction, whereas the left condemns those who were punished. This effect is intensified by use of the emblems of a lily for the saved, and a burning sword for the sinners. Below Christ there is a figure of Saint Michael, the leader of the heavenly host. He is portrayed as a young (to highlight his immortality) and handsome (as an embodiment of God's justice) man who wields a balance and weighs souls. The souls are depicted as little naked figures called "Virtule" and "Peccata". Van der Weyden placed on the pans of the balance naked doubles of the dead (his virtues

<sup>10</sup> J. Białostocki, *Ikonomia Dobra i Zła*, trans. K. Dobrzeński, "Teka Komisji Historii Sztuki" 1992, Vol. 23(3), p. 19.



and vices) which undergo the process of judgement. The painting was hung in the main hall of the hospital in Beaune and it could be seen by the ill from their beds during the mass.<sup>11</sup>

At the turn of the 1460s and 1470s Hans Memling created *The Last Judgement* triptych. It was commissioned by Angela de Jacopo Tani as a work of art for his ancestral chapel near Florence. By a set of coincidences, including the trade war between Hansa and England, not to mention pirate attacks, the painting found its place in Saint Mary's Church in Gdańsk.

Originally, Memling's *Last Judgement* was supposed to compete with the work by Rogier van der Weyden. Indeed, there are substantial similarities, including some elements of iconography or the way of presenting the main figures (for instance that of Christ), but there are also some differences, such as the change in the harmonization of the arrangement or altered direction of movement of the figures in the work. Memling showed psychomachia (the battle of spirits) clearly. The way he expressed the illusion and the means he used to convey it were a novelty. He did so by introducing the reflection of the spirit world from beyond the painting, in the archangel's armour.<sup>12</sup> According to Jan Białostocki, Memling's efforts refer to Eyck's language of light reflections and constitute "a masterful usage of a mirror leading to a consistent and full depiction of a space".<sup>13</sup> Unlike in van der Weyden's work, Memling presents the segregation not as a process of weighing virtues and vices of the deceased, but two separate people. As a result, one person goes to paradise, the other is condemned.

The comparison of the symbolic usage of scales in their paintings leads to the conclusion that in medieval times it was theology that played the most crucial role in the way justice was perceived and symbolized. A more accidental, but equally vital factor influencing the similarities between the paintings, is undoubtedly the fact that the artists were acquainted. There was a mention by Georgio Vasari that before his arrival to Bruges, Memling spent some time at van der Weyden's studio in Brussels.<sup>14</sup>

The Last Judgement depictions by Memling and van der Weyden differ significantly in the way they portray the symbolic usage of scales. In van der Weyden's work the Archangel Michael wears the vestment of a deacon – priest. The painter makes reference to the sacrament of Eucharist and the sacrifice Jesus made to save the whole of humanity, including the very people from the painting who, at that

<sup>11</sup> J. Białostocki, *Sztuka XV wieku. Od Parlerów do Dürera*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2010, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> A. Ziemba, *Sztuka Burgundii i Niderlandów 1380-1500*, Vol. 2: *Niderlandzkie malarstwo tablicowe 1430-1500*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2011, p. 549.

<sup>13</sup> J. Białostocki, *O dawnej sztuce, jej teorii i historii*, trans. K. Dobrzeniecki, Słowo/obraz/terytoria, Gdańsk 2009, p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> R. Genaille, op. cit., pp. 231, 318.



time, were undergoing the process of judgement. The archangel wears an alb and a richly ornamented outer garment pinned together with a brooch with a tracery motif in the form of three interwoven circles symbolizing the Holy Trinity. He is portrayed *en face*, like Jesus. What draws attention is his rich outfit and facial expression full of sensitivity (what is unlike any typical depictions of him).



III. 2. Hans Memling, *The Last Judgement* – triptych, 1467-1471, oil on wood, 221 × 161 cm (central panel), 223.5 × 72.5 cm (each side panel), The National Museum in Gdańsk

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org> [accessed: 12.11.2015].

The archangel is presented in the company of four angels playing trumpets. The dead come from beneath the ground and Saint Michael weighs good and bad deeds, which take the form of little naked figures, doubles of the deceased – *peccata* and *virtutes*. Both people on the scales are depicted in a praying position, with the difference that the saved one is turned to the archangel whereas the condemned looks away to a naked women coming out of her grave and reaching out her hand to the sinner. Psychostasia is presented as the rising of the soul of the saved and the falling of the condemned. The decision to choose such a solution could be dictated by his inner need. It does not match the traditional vision from the Book of Daniel 5:27: “you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting”.

In the Gdańsk triptych of Memling the Archangel Michael is situated below the figure of Christ in Majesty. Jesus is surrounded by the symbols of grace (the lily)

and punishment (the sword). On the clouds around Christ are the Apostles sitting, and Virgin Mary with Saint John the Baptist kneeling. The archangel is portrayed in a knight's armour. On the pans of the balance he holds there is "a kneeling figure of a soul with his hands folded in prayer [...] juxtaposed with a dramatically tossing figure of a 'bad' soul, helplessly reaching for an illusory help".<sup>15</sup>

The archangel weighs good and evil according to the Augustinian theology of grace, which means that people full of grace overbalance the sinners, who weigh as much as nothing. This idea is in line with the Book of Psalms: "Surely the lowborn are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie. If weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath" (Psalms 62:9).

The Archangel Michael symbolizes absolute justice, which is, unlike modern representations of Themis, not blind and, being responsible for the final judgement of humanity, has knowledge about everything.<sup>16</sup> The role of Christ in Glory is to be the judge whose raised right hand ensures the proper course of events. On both paintings it is Jesus who supervises Saint Michael's verdicts.

In Memling's work, similarly to many other depictions of the Last Judgement, the executors of verdicts are angels and devils. The former show the saved the way leading to the Heavenly Jerusalem, while the latter brutally push crowds of sinners to the pit. From time to time devils try to sneak up to the saved area and kidnap an innocent soul, but the angels chase them away.

Rogier van Weyden chose an original way of "executing" a sentence. In his vision of *The Last Judgement* souls go to their destinations voluntarily. Jan Białostocki claims that "a verdict has such a force that men and women led only by their own consciences go to the hellfire on the right or the Heaven's gate on the left. [...] No other physical pressure is needed to throw the sinners to hellfire. The scary expressions on their faces result from the inner tragedy of the condemned who are convinced that their verdicts are just and irrevocable."<sup>17</sup> In this way of depiction, van der Weyden represented the opinion that each person was responsible for their own salvation. The painter directly referred to the theory of deeds, having its roots in the Gospel of Matthew.

The third masterpiece, completing the evolution of meaning of the symbol of scales is *Woman Holding a Balance* by Jan Vermeer, the master of Delft. It was created in the years 1662-1663 and constitutes a reflection of the evolutionary processes taking place for more than two centuries in the symbolism and the axiology of Netherlandish painting. This work of art was created as one of a series of portrayals of a woman that Vermeer had painted since 1658. All the works have common characteristics; his paintings present a woman carrying out everyday du-

<sup>15</sup> J. Białostocki, *Ikonomia*..., p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> L. Ryken, J.C. Wilhoit, T. Longman III (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, InterVarsity Press, Leicester 1998, p. 763.

<sup>17</sup> J. Białostocki, *Sztuka*..., pp. 116-117.

ties, the atmosphere is full of concentration and reverie, the setting is a corner of a room next to a window, a narrow space partly filled with intensive sunlight. In that period, being under the influence of Fabritius, Vermeer devoted a lot of attention to visual-perspective issues, conveying “bright airiness and light in the space depicted”.<sup>18</sup>

The uniqueness of *Woman Holding a Balance* comes from the fact that it is unique even compared with the entire artistic output of Vermeer.<sup>19</sup> The play of light and shade and lowering the source of the former introduces the atmosphere of concentration on the inner life of a human being, a special type of silence and contemplation. This makes *Woman Holding a Balance* one of the most allegorical paintings and open to a wide range of interpretations. The painting is striking in its references to artistic means of expression used by Rembrandt. The light illuminates the woman and her face, partly covered in shadow, suggests she must be concentrated on her inner life. The painting hides plenty of secrets and ambiguities, for instance the alleged pregnancy of the woman, the “painting in a painting” phenomenon, or the reason for introducing the mirror and scales. Despite the extended symbolic layer, *Woman Holding a Balance* portrays a flesh and blood person, not a lifeless allegorical figure. As a result, the moral aspect of the painting is more popular, what means that its reception is more accessible for people.<sup>20</sup>

In Vermeer’s work nothing is obvious, not to mention the content of the balance. After meticulous analysis, it needs to be stated that the woman does not have pearls on the pans. They are empty and stay in perfect balance. This may be interpreted two ways – either as an attempt to achieve balance between the metaphysical (divine) and earthly (human) values, or as a fight between them.

The painting refers to the depictions of scales in big scenes of the Last Judgement. This happens thanks to the “painting in a painting” technique. The painting hanging on the wall behind the woman presents the Last Judgement. It broadens the range of possible interpretations of the scene from behind the table, making it become complex. What’s more, the Last Judgement has the same proportions as the main picture. The figure of a woman is placed on the axis of the Last Judgement and her head is exactly under the aureole of Christ in Glory. The woman covers the part of the painting on the wall that depicts the Archangel Michael wielding a balance. In this way she plays his role; symbolically she is his substitute.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Vermeer, *Johaness* [entry in:] R. Genaille, op. cit., pp. 276-380.

<sup>19</sup> Compare: N. Schneider, *Vermeer. The Complete Paintings*, Taschen, Köln 2007; J. Nash, *Vermeer*, trans. H. Adrzejewska, Arkady, Warszawa 1998.

<sup>20</sup> M.E. Wieseman, *Vermeer's Women. Secrets and Silence*, Yale University Press, New Haven [Conn.] 2011, pp. 82-89.

<sup>21</sup> A.K. Wheelock Jr., *Woman Holding a Balance*, National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov> [accessed: 1.10.2014].



III. 3. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, 1662-1663, oil on wood, 42.5 × 38 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org> [accessed: 12.11.2015]

Vermeer's work is filled with a moral message that is used to highlight the importance of conscience and deep thought over oneself. The balance is the central point of composition, the focus of attention. It was used in a natural way, not only referring to well-known iconographic motifs, but also going beyond them. Being combined with the scene presenting the Judgement on the wall and the mirror, the balance acquires a new interpretation. The empty pans of the scales show that this scene is indeed a depiction of weighing spiritual values; it proves that the real process takes place in the soul of the woman, who analyses and judges her life. The atmosphere full of concentration and reverie was created by applying subtle lighting and the shades cast by the curtains. The flickering light reflects off the surface of the balance, the painting, and the mirror. This highlights the importance of these items for interpreting the message of Vermeer's work.

Marjorie Wieseeman carried out a survey of major modern interpretations of the painting and most of the authors cited by her claim that this complex and thought-provoking work of art is in fact a paean to one value and virtue – conscience and the ability to make use of it. Such a general statement varies slightly in each interpretation. One of the conceptions is that Vermeer, a devoted catholic who was in contact with the Jesuits, was inspired by *The Spiritual Exercises* by Ignatius of Loyola, where the metaphor of scales as the conscience is clearly visible. According to the text, before meditation a person should put his good and bad deeds on the pans of a balance and assess oneself. That moment, full of reflection, will help to undergo the inevitable God's judgement without fear. When it comes to de Jongh's concept, the balance was used as an attribute of the woman, who was an allegorical representation of the conscience. On the table in front of her lies a box which was, according to tradition, a 17<sup>th</sup> century container for storing weights that were used to test coins. On the lid of the box there are glued personifications of the Conscience and Justice. This could be interpreted as a call for a constant examination of one's conscience, the need to "know oneself", and finally to match one's conscience with the model example. On the other hand, Herbert Rudolph claimed that the portrayed woman is a personification of vanity.<sup>22</sup> That opinion was popular mainly among older researchers, who took it as a fact that the pans contained jewels. So multiple and varied were the interpretations of the painting that for another researcher, Ivan Gaskell, the woman personified the truth.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the literature is full of speculations about the pregnancy of the woman. Referring this fact to the balance she holds, it might be stated that the woman tries to "estimate" the fate of her child. Undoubtedly the ideal of motherhood was different for Vermeer from that of modern painters. For him, motherhood was a state of existence expressed with the feeling of concern for a future child and its morality.<sup>24</sup>

The scales in the painting do not show the result, because the judgement takes place either in the woman's conscience or in her soul. She is a substitute for the Archangel Michael. Lacking his unlimited wisdom and infallibility, the woman has to replace objective evidence with her feelings. Despite that, she does not seem to be jittery or tormented by contradictions. The pans of the scales she holds stay in balance and concentration is written all over her face. Neither the woman's nor her child's fate has yet been determined. They still hang in the balance. According to some interpretations, the woman is a secularized depiction of the Blessed Virgin

<sup>22</sup> R. Herbert, 'Vanitas.' *Die Bedeutung mittelalterlicher und humanistischer Bildinhalte in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Festschrift für Wilhelm Pinder zum sechzigsten Geburtstag*, Verlag E. A. Seemann, Leipzig, 1938, pp. 408-412, 433.

<sup>23</sup> I. Gaskell, *Vermeer, Judgment and Truth*, "The Burlington Magazine" 1984, Vol. 126, pp. 557-561.

<sup>24</sup> M.E. Wieseeman, op. cit., pp. 82-89; A.K. Wheelock Jr., op. cit.



Mary and is said to symbolize sympathy, mercy, and the justice of care rather than the justice of gratitude.<sup>25</sup>

The meaning of the painting is universal. Conscience seems to be universally valid as well, notwithstanding changing religious, social and political conditions. The woman remains in front of the mirror with courage. She thinks about herself, tries to manage her own life in the best way, and this makes her unafraid of Christ's justice.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusions

Scales had appeared in the iconography long before the peak development of Netherlandish painting. They were present in the art of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia as well as in Greece, Rome and in the art of many European countries in the Middle Ages. One of the main symbolic meanings associated with scales was God's justice, shown in the scene of weighing souls. Scales – the symbol of judgement – also appeared as a symbol legitimizing the power of politicians and political institutions. Since ancient times they have been the badge of just, fair, and moderate rule, so it may be said that these two meanings of the symbol – both divine and human justice – were taken by the Netherlandish masters from earlier art, both European and world.

The uniqueness of the Netherlandish art lies in combining the trends of the universal European culture with a very characteristic local one. It gave new meanings to the symbol of the scales, which have been developed until the present day. The comparison of *The Last Judgement* by van der Weyden to *Woman Holding a Balance* by Vermeer makes it possible to propose the thesis that what has changed is the way of using the symbol. The reference to the Vermeer's "painting in a painting" technique, and placing *The Last Judgement* on the wall of the depicted room put the reality of God's justice in brackets, left it aside as one of many points of reference for a person, who has free will and his or her conscience.

Van der Weyden and Memling portrayed a vision of the Judgement that fills a person with fear. They are put in front of an act and mystery that go far beyond human measure – the judge is omnipresent, great and all powerful. It is a *mysterium tremendum*. Two centuries later, the power of judgement is transferred onto the field of individual choices. God shows only one of many possible solutions, admitting that a person has free will and may not listen to his instructions. The fear is replaced with calmness and concentration. This is called *mysterium fascinans*.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> W. Łysiak, *Malarstwo białego człowieka*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Vol. 2, Nobilis, Warszawa 2010, pp. 349-353.

Undoubtedly, there was a transition from metaphysical and orthodoxly religious to emotional and sentimental presentations of the issue of a just and correct judgement. Scales were transformed from the symbol of divine power to the attribute of power held by people. Within the space of two centuries their eschatological aspect turned into the immanent; the world of spirits was pushed away by the world of things and their qualities. In the painting of Vermeer the fight between good and evil was transferred from the field of the Final Judgement to the soul of a person. The Last Judgement on the wall and the balance in the hand of the woman orient the viewer of the painting to an allegorical interpretation of the work. *Woman Holding a Balance* is not another lesson about the dogma of the act of absolute justice as a remedy for a world plunged in sin. The pans of the scales are empty and stay in balance.

In their book, Judith Resnik and Dennis Curtis confirm that the iconography of Justice evolves in present times as well. Its visual representations must be coherent with society's current valuing of justice. Some depictions of justice present in court buildings are considered to be outdated in multicultural Western society, e.g. the image of Justice as the traditional white woman with a blindfold.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> J. Resnik, D. Curtis, *Representing Justice: Invention, Controversy, and Rights in the City-States and Democratic Courtrooms*, Yale University Press, New Haven – London 2011, p. 121.



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